

Faith Lift: Happy Easter

Almost everyone knows when Christians celebrate--December 25th. Almost everyone knows when Thanksgiving is. It's the last Thursday of November. But like the elusive risen Christ, appearing here and then there, we cannot tie down Easter to one specific numeric date. Why? Because Easter must always be celebrated on a Sunday. Why? Because it was on a Sunday that Jesus rose from the dead.

It was on a Sunday, the day AFTER the Sabbath day of rest that Jesus rose. For the people of Jesus' day, Sunday was their Monday. Sunday was the first work day of their week the day after their weekend. Jesus' resurrection moved the weekend!

Since the Council of Nicaea in 325, the dating of Easter has been that it be celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox. In the West, only the Celtic church in Britain and Ireland refused to accept the date until 664 because of their own Celtic calendar. Until 1582, New Years was celebrated the world round on April 1st with the arrival of spring. To me, it makes much more sense to celebrate the beginning of a new year with the bursting out of new life all around. On January 1st we still have months of winter ahead.

It's true that many of the current Easter customs we celebrate had their beginnings in the pagan celebrations of the rebirth of the earth in the spring. In fact, the English word for Easter is taken from the name of a Teutonic goddess of spring or the dawn. In the same way that the early Christians adopted and adapted pagan celebrations in the dead of winter to mark the birth of Jesus, they also adopted and adapted pagan celebrations of the Spring to mark the resurrection of their Lord. The events of what we call Holy Week originally occurred during the Jewish observance of Passover which also coincides with Spring.

In one sense it was out of a heart for evangelism that the church did this. Rather than try to convince pagans to give up their celebrations, the Christians added their meaning on top of the celebrations that were already going on. They did so following the old adage, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em?"

In ancient Egypt and Persia friends exchanged decorated eggs at the spring equinox. Eggs have always been symbols of creation, fertility and new-life and the beginning of the new year. These eggs were a symbol of fertility for them because the coming forth of a live creature from an egg was so surprising to people of ancient times.

Christians of the Near East adopted this tradition, and the Easter egg became a religious symbol. It not only represented new life but it represented the tomb from which Jesus broke forth. The chick bursting forth from its shell became a symbol for Jesus bursting forth from his tomb. A few weeks ago we read where Jesus did describe himself as being one who would love to gather his followers like a mother hen gathers her chicks.

In medieval times eggs were traditionally given at Easter to all servants, and to the children (it was one of the foods forbidden during Lent), along with other gifts. The eggs were often colored red to represent the blood of Christ by which all believers were given a share in this new life of Christ.

Not only were eggs a symbol of fertility and new life, rabbits were also a pre-Christian fertility symbol among the Egyptians and other ancient peoples. We know how fast rabbits can reproduce.

After Christ's resurrection, rabbits were used as images of Christ's post-resurrection appearances. These appearances were likened to the rabbits being seen and then disappearing and then being seen again somewhere else. (because of their tunnels)

The gospel accounts of Jesus' appearances after his resurrection are quick and darting, here and there, like the comings and goings of a rabbit. First, he's in the garden by the tomb, then he's in the Upper Room, then he's on the road to Emmaus, then he's back in the Upper Room when the men from Emmaus arrive to tell the Disciples what happened to them, then he's cooking breakfast for the Disciples in Galilee, then he's appearing to over 500 people, then he's on a mountain ascending to his Father from whence he came.

Since then, the Easter rabbit has become as traditional at Easter time as the Easter egg. It may have been intended to symbolize the fertile life that the risen Christ would send His followers.

The butterfly is also an ancient Easter symbol. Just as the butterfly which emerges from the cocoon is the same caterpillar in new form, so Jesus, emerged from the tomb the same person - yet glorified.

In the early church, those who were baptized at the Easter Vigil were dressed in a white robe. They would wear that robe throughout the whole Easter week as a symbol of their new life. Those who had already been baptized in prior years, did not wear white robes, but would wear new clothes to indicate their share in the new life of Christ. So, the wearing of new clothes at Easter was an external profession and symbol of the Easter grace. During the Middle Ages in Europe, people in their new Easter clothes would take a long walk after Easter Mass. This was a kind of procession preceded by a crucifix of the Easter Candle. The tradition evolved into EASTER PARADES.

In early Christian art the lily is a symbol of purity because of its delicacy of form and its whiteness. They did not exist in North America until about 100 years ago. The white trumpet lily, which blooms naturally in springtime, was brought here from Bermuda. They are popularly called "Easter Lilies because they bloom around Easter time. The American public quickly made it a symbolic feature of the Easter celebration. For some, the term "Easter Lily" has become a euphemism for folks that only show up at church on Easter: those who only come out to church once a year!

I hope some of you laughed when you read that last line. Early Christians customarily celebrated Easter Week as days of joy and laughter. They would tell jokes, play pranks, feast on lamb, dance, sing and express humor and joy over this "final joke" on the devil, death and evil.

I know this has been a long article, but I want to close with the lyrics of a song I wrote years ago called

"The Last Laugh."

Jesus was a man of sorrows, but he had a sense of humor too,
 It was plainly seen in the things that he would say and do.
 like when he healed a blind man by saying, "Here's mud in your eye!"
 and when he called the Pharisees, a bunch of blind guides.
 (I mean, would you sign up for a tour of the Grand Canyon if the guides were from the Lighthouse?)

Then there were the camel jokes he told his disciples
 like the one about the camel going through the eye of the needle
 and the camel that crawled in the goblet while the gnats were being strained,
 and the Pharisee chugged the camel down without a complaint.
 (would you like one hump or two with that sir?)

What about walking on the water?
 Changin' water into wine?
 healing on the Sabbath
 castin' demons into swine
 and how with a little fish and bread
 5,000 folks were fed
 how do we miss the humor
 in the things he did and said?

But the greatest one he ever pulled was just when all looked lost
 things looked so hopeless as he hung upon the cross.
 But the last laugh was heard around the world after his weekend stay
 and the final knockout punch line hit..when the stone was rolled away.

Happy Easter!